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Bureaucracy, Democracy and Race: The Limits of Symbolic Representation

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Abstract:

A bureaucracy that is representative of the public it serves – passive representation – can result in both active representation and symbolic representation. Symbolic representation occurs when passive representation improves perceptions of legitimacy and enhances bureaucratic outcomes because the public is more cooperative and more likely to engage in coproduction. We present a new micro-theory of symbolic representation to show that symbolic benefits of passive representation depend on some level of positive treatment by bureaucrats. We then illustrate the utility of this theory with qualitative interviews from two cities with large populations of people of color and high proportions of police officers of color. The results suggest that increasing the demographic representativeness of the bureaucracy may be a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for improving the relationship between the public and the bureaucracy.

Keywords: symbolic representation, representative bureaucracy, public perceptions, police, race

Practitioner Points:

Personal, familial or vicarious encounters with the police influence the public's perceptions of police officers.

The public recognizes the need for increased racial representation in policing; however, officers' attitudes and actions towards the public are more salient for shaping the public's perceptions of police.

Without benign treatment by bureaucrats, symbolic representation can be stymied and even result in no benefits or potentially negative effects for the public.

Representative bureaucracy is one prominent proposal to reconcile the need for bureaucracy with the imperatives of democracy (Ricucci and Van Ryzin 2017). The literature on representative bureaucracy incorporates three different definitions of representation – passive, active, and symbolic (see Kennedy 2014; Ricucci and Van Ryzin 2017). In his classic book, *Democracy and the Public Service*, Mosher (1968, p. 12-14) defined these terms and provided the motivation for the subsequent empirical work on representative bureaucracy. Passive representation was specified as the degree that the bureaucracy would “mirror the total society” in terms of demographic origins such as “previous occupation, father’s occupation, education, family income, family social class, race, religion” (p. 12). Active representation in contrast meant a bureaucrat was “expected to press for the interests and desires of those whom he is presumed to represent, whether they be the whole people or some segment of the people” (p. 12). Mosher (p. 13) admitted “we know too little about the relationship between a man’s background and preemployment socialization on the one hand, and his orientation and behavior in office on the other.” While he conceded this was an important question, he made an independent case for the symbolic benefits of passive bureaucratic representation:

While passive representativeness is no guarantor of democratic decision-making, it carries some independent and symbolic values that are significant for a democratic society. A broadly representative public service, especially at the level of leadership, suggests an open service in which access is available to most people, whatever their station in life, and in which there is equality of opportunity. (1968, p. 13-14)

To drive his point home, Mosher (p. 14) concludes, “The importance of passive representativeness often resides less in the behaviors of public employees than in the fact that the employees who are there are there at all.”

Although symbolic representation has been a concern in the representative bureaucracy literature from its onset (Kingsley 1944; Long 1952), recent empirical research has both

embraced the concept and demonstrated its importance in shaping both public attitudes and policy outcomes (Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006; Merritt 2019; Park and Liang 2019; Riccucci and Van Ryzin 2017; Riccucci, Van Ryzin and Li 2016; Theobald and Haider-Markel 2008; Vinopal 2017). At the same time, the implications of symbolic representation have shifted over time. Early authors such as Long (1952), Krislov (1974), and Mosher (1968) contended a broadly representative bureaucracy provided a strong signal that the bureaucracy and government itself was open to and accessible by the general population (see also Riccucci and Van Ryzin 2017). The benefits of passive representation were in essence symbolic, a reassurance that the process of government was open to all people.

More recent work has linked passive representation to policy outcomes that benefit the represented but suggested that these results could occur without any bureaucratic action at all. Strong relationships between teachers and the school performance of students imply that these results could occur simply because represented students changed behavior in response to the race or gender of the teacher, a role model effect (see Grissom, Kern and Rodriguez 2005; Keiser et al. 2002). Women appear to be more willing to report sexual assaults in cities with more female police officers (Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006; Schuck 2018). Similar findings in regard to either race or gender have emerged in relation to equal employment complaints (Hinderer 1993), child support enforcement (Wilkins and Keiser 2004), rural home loan programs (Selden 1997), and parental involvement in schools (Vinopal 2017).

Symbolic representation is the impact of passive representation on the public, originally conceptualized as leading to enhanced public perceptions of bureaucratic legitimacy. Current extensions of the concept specify that passive representation can also lead to changes in policy

outcomes that benefit the represented without any changes on behalf of the bureaucracy at all. Rather, passive representation can lead to behavioral changes in the public, such as greater cooperation or coproduction of good and services – this too is symbolic representation. Thus, bureaucracies can benefit directly from representation in terms of image, client satisfaction, and performance without any substantive changes in policy or action.

This paper takes an exploratory approach by examining public perceptions of bureaucrats to suggest that symbolic representation has limits. Passive representation without an organizational commitment to positive or fair treatment by bureaucrats can limit the potential symbolic benefits of demographic representation. This is particularly relevant in policy areas with a presence of past injustice. The argument takes three parts. First, we present a new micro-theory of symbolic representation and explain why it works to detail the complex process by which passive representation can produce symbolic benefits. In this section we also discuss the limits of symbolic representation. Second, we provide an illustrative example of this theory using in-depth interviews and a qualitative analysis of factors affecting public perceptions toward policing from two cities with predominantly communities of color and diverse police forces. Since this study is exploratory in nature, our qualitative interviews are only able to illuminate four key parts of the proposed micro-theory: the individual identity of the civilian, their overall perceptions of the police, the lived experiences of interviewees, and their general desires or expectations for how they want to be treated. Overall, we find that the symbolic impact of demographics alone cannot fully explain residents' perceptions. Rather, two key factors that influence respondent perceptions are their vicarious or lived experiences and their perceptions of police treatment. Third, we discuss the implications of our findings for police services

specifically and representative bureaucracy in general.

The Micro-theory of Symbolic Representation

The theory of representative bureaucracy, whether focused on symbolic representation or on the translation of passive representation to active representation, starts with individual identities. The demographic origins that occupy the literature require the origins to create a salient individual identity (II) so that the individual identifies with some set of characteristics – race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social status, and so forth. Identities, however, are not always fixed characteristics that arise at birth and remain unchanged for a person’s life, but rather they are shaped by the lived experiences (LE) of the person (see figure 1; de Boer 2020; Park 2020; Zamboni 2020). Identities are formed by how a person sees himself or herself and how others see and treat the person. In essence this means that identities and lived experiences are reciprocally related. A person’s lived experiences affect his or her identity; and those identities influence the person’s lived experiences.¹ Identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, social status and others can be fluid and endogenous; they may vary across and within individuals, space, and time.

[Figure 1 About Here]

This potential variation presents three complications for the study of representative bureaucracy, including that of symbolic representation. First, the variation across individuals means that while both Clarence Thomas, Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, and John Lewis, U.S. Congressman and civil rights leader, identify as Black males, the relevance of their

identity may vary in magnitude and result in different values that each might consider in representation.² Second, the variation across space means that identities such as race and gender differ by country and sometimes locations within countries. A Puerto Rican resident might logically perceive himself or herself one way on the island but have to reckon with racial differentiations of Black and White when in the United States (Landale and Oropesa 2002). Third, identities change over time as lived experiences build up or erode relative to the identity. What gender or sexual orientation meant in the US in the 1950s was distinctly different from what they mean today as the result of major social movements, significant policy actions, and concerted efforts to change sex roles in society (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008).

For symbolic representation, together the identity and lived experiences of an individual create the expectations (E) that he or she has when coming into contact with a bureaucracy. These expectations concern how the individual expects to be treated by the bureaucracy and may range from positive to negative (and this can be irrespective of the bureaucrats' identity). One person may expect to be treated equitably and rationally, whereas another may expect to be treated unfairly or unjustly. In some cases, the individual might generalize by how other organizations or bureaucrats have treated him or her in other contexts. Thus, it is possible that a person of color might see society as generally prejudiced and thus expect biased treatment regardless of the specific bureaucratic context. Even these generalized expectations will be tempered by lived experiences just as lived experiences are interpreted via these generalized expectations. To take our current substantive case, race and policing, an individual might draw on prior contacts with the police, contacts between the police and people the individual knows, or reports of police behavior in the media – whether they be positive or negative.

In symbolic representation, the individual's prior expectations (E) become affected by the passive representation of the bureaucrat (PR) when the individual comes into contact (C) with the bureaucrat.³ To the extent that the bureaucrat looks like the individual, theory contends that the individual is likely to move their expectations in a positive direction and that, in turn, will generate greater trust in the bureaucracy or a greater belief in the legitimacy of the encounter's process (Ricucci and Van Ryzin 2017, p. 21). This change in expectations can motivate the individual to take a more cooperative posture toward the bureaucrat or to engage in greater coproduction (Ricucci, Van Ryzin and Li 2016; Vinopal 2017). The change in expectations is not necessarily contingent on anything the bureaucrat actually does. In fact, these symbolic benefits are theorized to occur (and supported by experimental evidence that they exist; Ricucci et al. 2016) whether or not the bureaucrat engages in anything resembling active representation.

At contact, both the individual (IB) and the bureaucrat (BB) engage in a variety of behaviors relative to each other depending on the purpose of the contact. A police contact may lead to an officer providing additional information (e.g., a new speed limit has been posted), acquiring more information (e.g., gathering information about a crime), enforcing a law, or making an arrest. These are all forms of bureaucratic behavior (BB), and some of these bureaucratic actions might be in response to the behavior of the individual (see Theobald and Haider-Markel 2008). The contact in turn produces some result (R) that affects the individual, and the individual judges it as positive, neutral or negative. The important consideration for symbolic representation is not only how the individual initially responds to the bureaucrat (IB) but also how he or she perceives (P) the end result rather than the actual outcome of the encounter per se.

The contact may be actual or vicarious, that is, it might not be a contact between the individual per se and the bureaucrat. A vicarious contact might include a friend telling the individual about the friend's contact with the police. Such a vicarious contact would still trigger a result that the individual could consider, giving it more or less weight depending on what the individual thought of the friend (i.e., the credibility of the source). A vicarious contact might also be a media report of someone else's encounter (e.g., a video of a police encounter). The degree to which the individual identified with the civilian who actually was involved in the given encounter would also impact how the individual interpreted this vicarious event.

The important consideration in terms of the limitations of symbolic representation is that the result of this encounter becomes a lived experience for the individual and thus creates a feedback process between how the individual felt about the encounter (in terms of fairness, equity, and so forth) and the person's identity and, more importantly, the person's future expectations.⁴ Positive results are likely to generate more positive expectations which in turn are likely to induce the individual to be more cooperative with a bureaucrat from the same organization the next time and can potentially create a virtuous cycle.⁵ The degree and stability of change is likely dependent on the importance of the contact and how strongly the prior attitudes were held. Research in psychology and neuroscience suggests that negative experiences can outweigh positive experiences, thus it may take a surplus of positive interactions to counter the effects of a single negative one (Baumeister et al. 2001; Glaser and Glaser 2013). Nevertheless, a positive feedback cycle is the objective of some bureaucratic processes such as parent-teacher conferences and parental participation in their child's education. More importantly, negative results will lower expectations and can encourage the individual to avoid

further interaction or even resist what he or she might perceive as being unfair or arbitrary treatment.

Overall, our proposed theoretical process suggests that symbolic representation is subject to limits and might have no impact whatsoever in some cases. At the organizational level, we contend that professions that only commit to symbolic representation will not automatically gain any positive responses from clientele. Recent scholarship on policing and race has found that even some of the most diverse police departments do not produce all of the intended benefits for people of color related to use of force, civilian complaints or trust (Sharp and Johnson 2009; Wright 2019; Wright and Headley 2020). Further, it may be possible that symbolic representation without an active commitment to organizational change may result in worse outcomes for marginalized communities. Traffic stop data in San Diego, California, for example, showed that as Black officer presence increased so did racial disparities in police stops (Wilkins and Williams 2008).

When examining symbolic representation from the client perspective, the theory indicates that symbolic representation requires that the client interpret passive representation as resulting in at least neutral treatment by the bureaucrat if not favorable treatment. Symbolic representation cannot exist, however, in a vacuum, but rather operates within the lived experiences of the individual. Prior negative treatment by passively representative bureaucrats should not logically lead to expectations of positive treatment in the present case. Expectations for treatment rely on perceptions of past treatment – that is lived experiences, either real or vicarious. For the individual, if evidence builds up that passive representation is not associated with any relevant outcome changes or perhaps even associated with negative treatment, that individual may reject

the notion that a passively representative bureaucrat engenders positive expectations.

The Case for Race and Police

In order to properly explore the theoretical tenets that we are proposing, we focus on race. The symbolic benefits of passive representation can be applied to any demographic characteristic that is visible or perceived by the public. Race is one of the most visible and is particularly salient in the United States due to longstanding historical racial tensions. We explore race in the highly salient context of policing (Menifield, Shin, and Strother 2019).

In the United States, modern policing is rooted in slave patrols and night watches that kept people of color under control, particularly in Southern states (Headley 2020). Even after the first formal organized police forces were started in the mid-1800s in places such as New York City, New Orleans, Cincinnati, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Milwaukee, and Baltimore, they were monolithic, comprised of all-White and all-male officers. Thus, race has been central to the inception of policing. National police commissions have acknowledged the need for police departments to represent the communities of color that they serve, including the 1968 National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder, the 1973 National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals, and the 2015 President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (Headley and Wright 2019).

More recent killings of Black people across the United States – such as Michael Brown in Ferguson, Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and George Floyd in Minneapolis – have led to international protests and demonstrations against police brutality. Demands for racial representation frequently follow problematic events, such as inappropriate or excessive use of force against people of color, in hopes that such events will decrease or be prevented in the

future. As such, police departments across the country have been trying different approaches to recruit and hire diverse candidates because they recognize the importance of having a representative police force (Linos and Riesch 2020). We use this analysis to add to policy discussions around the role of increased diversity in police departments and the limits thereof.

Context, Data and Methods

To explore whether there are limits to symbolic representation, we need to focus on how individuals respond to and/or perceive bureaucrats in an area with salient demographic representation. Since this study is exploratory in nature, one promising approach is to use qualitative interviews where individuals are free to express unstructured opinions in regard to police representation in cities with high levels of representation of police of color. From the theory in Figure 1, we will explicate four key parts. Symbolic representation rests on individual identity of the civilian (II) and the expectations (E) of how individuals think they will be treated by the bureaucracy particularly when interacting with a bureaucracy. The contact with the bureaucracy becomes part of the individual's lived experiences (LE), but this lived experience is interpreted by how the individual perceives (P) the result of the interaction. Our analysis will focus, as a result, on how individuals perceive the police in their city, their underlying reasons for such perceptions, and how their perceptions shape their expectations about how they will be treated by the police.

Interviews were conducted with community members in Hartford, CT, and Washington, DC, two cities that in theory offer a highly favorable situation for symbolic representation given that 60% of police in Washington and 33% in Hartford are either Black or Hispanic. In Washington, in fact, Blacks are actually overrepresented on the police force compared to the

general population. While Washington is a larger city than Hartford, both cities have a sizable populations of people color (see table 1); in fact, only two-fifths of Washington and one-sixth of Hartford residents identify as White. Both cities also have higher crime rates than the national average.

[Table 1 About Here]

Analyses are based on data from 70 interviews with community members, 39 in Washington, DC, and 31 in Hartford, CT. The data were drawn from two broader projects examining police relations in their respective communities (Headley 2018; Wright 2018). The first set of interviews were conducted between November 2015 to April 2016 in Washington; the second set of interviews were conducted during June to August of 2017 in Hartford. In both cases, interviewees were selected using purposive and volunteer sampling. Our goal was not to achieve a representative sample of survey respondents. Rather, in Hartford, it was important that interviewees were active in their community, had some form of engagement with public service, and were knowledgeable about policing. Similarly, residents in Washington were selected if they attended at least one public forum in their community in which police officers gave presentations regarding the crime statistics in the area. Further, we were interested in ensuring we had a diverse sample of interviewees in order to provide a range of perspectives and experiences (see sample descriptive statistics in table 2).

[Table 2 About Here]

On average, interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, with a minimum of 20 minutes to a maximum of 113 minutes. Semi-structured interview protocols were used with open-ended questions and probes that covered a variety of topics on police-community relations in the United States, policing in their local city, organizational factors that affected policing (e.g., body worn cameras), demographic influences on policing (e.g., race and policing), trust of law enforcement, police-civilian interactions, and the like. While the interview respondents were not asked the exact same questions across cities, for the purpose of this paper, we focus specifically on interviewee responses that touched on factors that shaped their perceptions toward and attitudes of policing as suggested by our theory. The semi-structured nature of the interview provided guidance to the interviewers but allowed for flexibility and a conversational style interview (Marshall and Rossman 2014). Consent was granted by each interviewee, and they were ensured confidentiality.

The data were analyzed using a multi-step process of qualitative content analysis. First, we read each interview in its entirety. Second, we coded interviews line-by-line applying a priori codes as well as open codes. The a priori codes were developed in light of the research goal herein: we coded people's perceptions of and general attitudes towards policing and police-community relations – grouped into broad themes of negative and positive. Then, we coded the potential factors to explain such perceptions as identified by the interview participants. Specifically, we looked at the role of direct or familial contact with police, narratives passed down by family and friends, media, and the relevance of race. Additional open codes developed naturally from the text. After coding was complete, we created labels and categories for codes,

and looked for larger patterns and linkages across categories to identify relationships and themes (Braun and Clarke 2006; Yin 2006). In the following sections, we include quotes to illustrate the themes we found most consistently across the data. We also include observation counts for our major themes.

Findings

Perceptions of the Police. Symbolic representation purports that it operates independently of actual bureaucratic treatment or behavior. Thus, based on this tenet alone, one might expect generally positive perceptions of the police across our two cities, especially in Washington with its majority Black police force. Yet, that was not the case. Community members' views on law enforcement are mixed with both positive and negative perceptions, pointing to the fact that passive representation is not the only driving force undergirding perceptions (see Sharp and Johnson 2009). Of the 70 interviews across both cities, almost half of the respondents expressed outright negative sentiments about the police directly, often acknowledging the fraught relations between the police and the community (n = 33). In Hartford, 21 respondents spoke about negative or tenuous relations between police and the community, compared to 12 interviews in Washington. A young Black man in Washington stated "law enforcement has come to a point where they are a gang in my eyes. They are a legal gang [...] all officers abuse their authority." A middle-aged Black woman in Washington commented, "well I can say that law enforcement doesn't necessarily care too much about Black people [...] It seems to me that most of the time they are out there serving their own purpose in the community." Similarly, in Hartford, interviewees discussed the fear and mistrust between the community and the police department. An older Black man in Hartford shared "a lot of people in the community

see the police as the enemy and the police see the citizens as the enemy also.” Another older black man in Hartford added, “there is a definite line, and a tenuous line between the community and the police [...] it's a tale of two cities. The residents don't trust the police and to be honest, I don't think the police trust the residents.”

Approximately half of all respondents expressed positive perceptions of the police department in their respective cities ($n = 35$), 18 interviews in Hartford and 17 interviews in Washington. Respondents in Washington who shared positive perceptions couched them in the ways in which police do their job, the purpose they serve in communities, and the challenges faced in the policing profession more generally. For instance, a middle-aged Black man shared “I am pro law enforcement. I believe it is a very hard job to do, but it takes a particular type of individual to want the job. [In] most professions there are bad apples that need to be weeded out.” On the other hand, when Hartford residents expressed positive perceptions it was usually a reflection on the progress that has been made over time and the ongoing efforts aimed at improving police-community relations. For instance, an older Black man shared that in the last four or five years, “I think that it has really improved significantly. And I know there's room for improvement. But from where we were five years ago to where we are right now, I'm telling you, there's a major difference.”

Our theory suggests that such perceptions, whether positive or negative, result from prior lived experiences. In trying to dissect the contributing factors to people's perceptions of police in their local community to illuminate our theory, we identified two key themes across interviewees from both cities: (a) personal, familial or vicarious experiences and stories with police and (b) the role of media. An additional finding centers on the role of race. However, only Hartford

respondents were explicitly asked about race and police-community relations, whereas Washington residents were not.⁶

Personal, Familial or Vicarious Experiences with Police. In total, 48 of the 70 total interviews, touched on personal, familial, or vicarious experiences and interactions with the police that ranged from positive to negative (21 interviews in Hartford and 27 in Washington). This appeared to be an important influence on perceptions of police. One young Black woman in Hartford highlighted the importance of experiences by stating

I think, just one life at a time, one mind at a time can help improve police-community relations entirely because the best promotion is word of mouth. So, if people have a positive experience, they'll share it, and that will keep spreading and can help inspire or encourage others who are having a hard time with officers and help to change perception, one mind and one story at a time.

Interviewee experiences can be grouped into four sub-categories of (a) direct positive encounters with the police (24 interviews), (b) general negative familial and vicarious experiences (17 interviews), (c) direct negative encounters with the police (11 interviews), and (d) negative lessons and instructions passed down by family and friends (11 interviews).

First, in total, in 24 interviews, respondents across both cities shared direct positive experiences they had with the police (11 in Hartford and 13 in Washington). In Hartford, respondents spoke from their capacity as informal or formal community leaders and discussed how their experiences with the police department had been positive. When organizational leaders spoke from this perspective, they indicated the police responsiveness to their concerns. For instance, an older Black man shared, "I think more often than not most people who have had to deal with police officers find that they are there frankly to help to alleviate a problem more than cause them." Similarly, in 4 of the 13 interviews conducted in Washington people discussed their

positive experiences and interactions from their leadership role in the community. For instance, a middle-aged White woman noted, “we run a neighborhood watch, myself and a few of the people I live nearby. We had to go down to our local station and tell them we originally wanted to do that. Overall, the process was smooth, and they spoke to us, so we were able to understand how hard their job is.” However, in the remaining 9 of the 13 Washington interviews, rather than speaking from a leadership position specifically, respondents spoke about having positive experience with police officers due to the way police treated them during formal or informal encounters. In the formal encounters people referenced both police-initiated incidents (e.g., pedestrian or traffic stops) as well as civilian-initiated incidents (e.g., 911 calls). For instance, respondents discussed police responsiveness to their concerns – e.g., a middle-aged Black man noted, “when I call them about people loitering outside my store, they come right away.” Informal encounters included having friends or family who were cops and interacted socially (n = 5). In reflecting on police treatment, a young White man noted “my parents used to know a cop who would come over sometimes, and he was a really nice dude. Always brought something for my sister and I.”

Second, rather than sharing direct personal negative experiences they had with the police, in 17 interviews, respondents touched on the negative experiences and interactions of others. In 5 of the Washington interviews, respondents shared stories of the direct negative encounters of others, such as unjustified stops or searches as well as a lack of responsiveness to crime concerns. For instance, a middle-aged Black woman shared a story of how one of her friends was beaten to death with an iron pipe in the 1990s and she noted the police “barely tried to find who did it” and ultimately “never found the killer.” In Hartford, 12 interview respondents shared

stories or anecdotes speaking on behalf of others. For instance, speaking about youth, an older Black man noted “there’s a mistrust. There’s an encounter with the police department that happened at an earlier age that made them a part of the system. [...] and, because they become so ostracized in their minds that they rather not have anything to do with the police department.” Also, a middle-aged White man in Hartford shared that there have been times other community members have complained about drug dealers in their community or in their housing complexes and it appeared that nothing was done about it.

Third, in a smaller subset of interviews, respondents touched on personal negative experiences they had with the police (8 in Washington and 3 in Hartford interviews). In 4 of the 8 Washington interviews, respondents spoke about a lack of responsiveness to their own community concerns. For instance, an older Black woman shared a story where a police car was in front of her house and she stated, “I kept wondering why he was sitting there with his lights on. I went back into the kitchen and heard gun shots. I believe that he saw the whole thing. Two or three neighbors went outside and asked the police why he didn’t do anything, and he just rolled his eyes and left.” In the other half of the Washington interviews, respondents alluded to police treating them unfairly. For instance, a young Black man recounted an incident: “I was 10 years old, I was walking down the street and there was a house that got broken into. The police came up to me and searched me. It was ridiculous that they searched me, because I was only 10 years old!” In Hartford a middle-age Black woman recounted an experience she had with the police and shared, “I live on a nice street. I’m educated. I have a master’s degree. I can articulate myself pretty well. And he came, just treated me like trash. He didn’t even care to have a conversation with me.” Interviews that touch on both vicarious and personal experiences suggest

that apart from having direct negative enforcement encounters with police, a lack of care and concern exhibited by police when they fail to appropriately respond to or address crime in communities can be damaging to community perceptions and deteriorate community expectations.

Lastly, a subset of interviews touched on how negative lessons and instructions can be passed down by family and friends regarding the police (8 in Washington and 3 in Hartford), reflecting transmission of others' vicarious experiences. In Hartford, respondents talked about the ways in which families can reproduce negative images of police to their children. For instance, an older White man noted that "part of the problem may be here you got kids growing up in families where people are constantly criticizing the police." In Washington interviews, Black respondents shared specific instructions passed down to them that ranged from "avoiding the police", to "putting both hands on the wheel so they can see your hands so nothing bad happens to you", to "don't stop under any circumstances until you are near a well-lit gas station where there are other people." They also shared lessons and beliefs passed down included "police don't care about Black people," "they treat us like dogs because they think we are dogs," "police officers are prone to look at us as second-class citizens," and "police are not here to protect you but to monitor you."

The Role of Media. In total, 45 of the 70 interviews across both cities touched on the role of media (29 in Washington and 16 in Hartford). Three sub-themes were apparent here: (a) media as an information-gathering tool (15 interviews), (b) the influence of negative incidents being shared in the media (25 interviews), and (c) the need for more positive images in the media (7 interviews). While the first and third sub-themes indicate the media operates as a conduit for

information, the second sub-theme is directly relevant for our theory and thus we will focus solely on this sub-theme.

In 25 interviews across both cities (13 in Hartford and 12 in Washington) there was an explicit acknowledgement of the potential negative influence of media due to the display of negative police-civilian encounters. In the 13 Hartford interviews, respondents often recounted events that occurred across the country as well as incidents that happened locally in their city. In alluding to the impact that seeing such negative incidents has, a middle-aged Black man stated “so, you can have the best police department but if I’m looking on my TV about another person who looks like me, getting shot for no reason, you’re automatically suspect to me.”

In the 12 Washington interviews, respondents focused specifically on the negative events that have transpired in the media across the country, including Ferguson and South Carolina, rather than touching on local incidents. In 10 of these interviews, when respondents discussed these incidents it was also clear that it affected their own perceptions. A middle-aged Black man noted, “you know what upset me and really slanted my thinking was seeing that boy in Ferguson getting shot by the police for no reason.” Further, a middle-aged White woman also shared, “when I see how the media depicts some of these officers, based upon my experience I wonder how they could even have jobs. Like what they did in Ferguson was so traumatic for me.”

Race. Hartford respondents were explicitly asked about the role of race in police-community relations, whereas Washington residents were not. In Hartford, 24 respondents spoke about the role of racial representation in policing, which can be grouped into 2 primary sub-themes: (a) race’s impact on public sentiments (16 interviews), and (b) the limits of racial representation (13 interviews).

First, the interview respondents recognized the symbolic value of passive representation; 16 respondents spoke about the face-value impact of having officers of color for communities of color in particular. Respondents shared how increased trust, respect, and comfort with officers of color would improve the public's overall perceptions of police. For instance, an older White man noted that "there is some benefit of the doubt that citizens give to officers who look like them, and more willing to extend them the courtesy of trust and respect." On the other hand, a middle-aged Black woman shared that "when you have other people, people of non-color, policing people of color there's already a tension that is there." Another middle-aged Black woman suggested "there might be some trepidation immediately if you look at a White officer, because [residents of color] probably had bad interactions with them most of the times. [...] So, I think that [residents of color] would possibly put their guard down or have an expectation that if they look like them, they would probably treat them with a little bit more respect and empathy." Three of the 16 respondents went on to explain that the police department would be better suited to get information regarding criminal incidents from the community if there was more racial representation. For instance, an older Black woman shared that "the majority of them are Caucasian and [this city] is a 90% minority town so when people see them, unless they build a relationship with them, they look at them as the outsider even if they're in [this city], they still are the outsider. So, it makes it kinda difficult [...] to solve cases, makes it difficult for a person to actually trust you."

There were also 13 interviews where respondents expressed concerns about racial representation as a solution for behavioral change among police officers, thus acknowledging potential limits of representation in policing. While some respondents acknowledged the need for

more representation, it was clear what was most important among these interview respondents overall was police treatment and the quality and relatability of officers. For instance, a middle-aged Black man noted that “[an officer] being Black is cool. I’m always gonna say Black is great, right? Like having a Black person somewhere that’s qualified, that’s good, it’s great. But there’s also a relational culture to the police that needs to be broadened, that needs to be more focused on.” Further hinting at the importance of relatability and understanding, a middle-aged Black woman shared “because you’re a minority, if you could grow up with a certain level of privilege or a better socio-economic upbringing, then you might not be able to relate to individuals who have less. So, I’m not a 100% sure. I don’t think it’s always about the color. I think it’s really about the upbringing and the exposure and the empathy of the individual.”

Likewise, an older White man shared that his professional experience taught him

that there’s always bad people and there’s always good people in every culture. And so, I’m not gonna sit here and tell you that there haven’t been African American and Hispanic officers who have done bad things to the general community in Hartford including African Americans, Latinos, and others. But, on the whole, in my opinion, that has nothing to do with it. It has to do the way a police officer ought to act. I don’t care what race, religion, or anything he is and how he ought to act toward everybody.

A subset of these 13 respondents ($n = 5$) hinted at the power of the police badge and the uniform, which could potentially overshadow any behavioral effects of racial representation. For instance, an older Black man shared “for the most part, when Black and Brown officers put on the blue, they become blue people. And that blue wall, that blue shield, and blue curtain, whatever the metaphor that works for you, becomes what is the primary identification.” Similarly, an older Hispanic woman noted, “the police are trained in a way, they train Latinos, African Americans, and White the same. [...] I think it does make a difference because the

perception. It is not necessarily that they're gonna be better or worse than the White officer, it's just the perception that there's somebody of your color or my color in the police department.”

Qualitative Interviews Summary

The qualitative interviews illustrate a set of key findings that are central to the theory about the limits of symbolic representation. First, public perceptions of the police (P) are based on lived experiences (LE) and the interactions between the public and law enforcement officers (Merritt 2019; Merritt et al. 2020; Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2019). These lived experiences can either directly involve the person, or they can be vicarious involving friends, family, or even total strangers based on media accounts. These experiences create expectations (E) for how the individual will be treated when interacting with police officers. Negative experiences generate negative expectations whereas positive experiences generate positive attitudes. Such expectations are an important contributor to how the individual will respond or will perceive the officer's actions (e.g., as legitimate or not).

Second, the public believes that passive (racial) representation (PR) among the police can be beneficial (see Headley and Wright 2020). Respondents mention how representation can foster greater understanding of circumstances when the police encounter individuals, and they see that it can facilitate cooperation. At the same time, the interviews suggest that the public does not see representation as a panacea; rather, they stress how police officers behave rather than how they look (see also Bader 2020). Although some group all police officers as a negative force, overall, the statements are balanced suggesting that police actions and behaviors are key to seeing the benefits of representation just as they are core to attitudes about the police.

Third, the first two findings underscore the basic thrust of the theory, that there are limits

to passive representation's symbolic impact. The symbolic benefits of passive representation appear to be contingent on how the police have treated individuals in the past, either in direct interactions or vicariously. The expectations expressed concerning police behavior might be categorized as meeting expectations for fair and responsive treatment (i.e., positive treatment). In most cases residents, in particular people of color, were not seeking additional benefits but asking for reduced bias in service delivery and interactions with the organization. In the history of the U.S., police have actively targeted, harassed and discriminated against Blacks (Brunson 2007). While theory implies that increased representation in an organization should lead to better outcomes, given the historic tensions and confrontations between bureaucrats and civilians, the perceived 'better outcomes' from increased representation may just be reducing systemic inequity in the treatment of people of color by the organization. This was prevalent in the interviews; individuals wanted police officers to do their job in a prompt, responsive manner, and accord people of color the responsive treatment that any victim might receive. In other cases, individuals expressed that they were singled out unfairly for searches or other unwarranted contacts. The representational objective again was equity, not preferential treatment (Liang, Park, and Zhao 2020; Meier 2019).

Conclusion

Representative bureaucracy can produce benefits through either active or symbolic representation (Bishu and Kennedy 2019). However, we theorize and find that there are limits to the symbolic benefits of passive representation insomuch as full benefits can only be achieved when some element of positive or equitable treatment is also present. The relative amount of behavior that is inconsistent with equity or fair treatment, therefore, is important to identify.

Passive representation may indeed lead to symbolic representation in a bureaucratic context that does not necessarily have a history of unjust, systematic or inequitable behavior. However, in contexts with past inequities from bureaucrat behavior that yield differential outcomes for certain groups of people, continued injustice and maltreatment prevents full attainment of the positive symbolic benefits of demographic representation. Thus, solely focusing on symbolic representation at some point can be perceived as window-dressing that does not correct for actual wrongdoings by the organization.

The theory of representative bureaucracy posits that demographic representation matters because there is a shared experience, affinity or understanding that undergirds shared identity. Simply, the shared demographic characteristic functions as a symbol for a shared cultural connection between the bureaucrat and the individual (this is not visible but assumed by the theory). This “sharing” leads either the bureaucrat or the civilian to behave differently; but when a bureaucrat-civilian interaction is at odds with the shared belief that was originally perceived to be held in common, it may outweigh a shared identity. Thus, in an initial encounter, the civilian interacting with a bureaucrat of similar identity may assume a shared cultural connection, but the civilian’s experience in that interaction will inform whether the mutual understanding or connection existed in the first place. This is particularly salient for a negative interaction – granted, we are unsure how many negative interactions it may take to wash out prior assumptions or symbolic benefits of passive representation, but clearly our interviews suggest that behavior matters.

Our qualitative data and evidence are specific to the context of policing, and we acknowledge that police serve a function that is different from many other public services in

terms of intensity and intent. Policing is usually, but not always, in response to a negative incident where the victim needs assistance or police are enforcing the law for an offense committed. This is different from other contexts where there are desirable positive interactions and outcomes being assessed – e.g., in the case of education and students improving test scores. Even so, the generalizability of our proposition – behavior trumping demographic representation – should be explored in other public policy areas (e.g., health care, social welfare, education) where there is potential for unfair or inequitable treatment as well as with other identities (e.g., gender, social class). For instance, in the context of education, future research could examine the extent to which hiring more teachers of color without changing inequitable student disciplinary outcomes might influence student perceptions in the long run. Our micro-theory would suggest that the symbolic benefits of passive representation may only persist overtime if these new teachers engage in different behavior, such as actually working to correct the imbalance in prior suspensions so that outcomes change as a result of their hires (i.e., active representation). We believe the logic underlying this argument is even more applicable to contexts that also have historically exhibited inequitable and unfair treatment.

Unfortunately, our data does not allow us to identify the race of the officer when respondents shared stories of prior encounters with officers. We assume that based on the overall racial distribution of officers of color in each of the police departments that there is a greater chance of respondents interacting with officers of color in these two cities as compared to other cities where representation on the police force is substantially lower. The theory of representative bureaucracy also argues that when there is a substantial amount of representation in a workforce that peer effects may happen, affecting the behavior of other officers. Nonetheless, this is a

limitation of our data and future research should account for this more precisely. Lastly, as alluded to above, we do not know the breaking points where experience may trump perceptions and the lack of positive treatment may counter the presence of symbolic representation, making descriptive representation insufficient. Further empirical research is needed to systematically and rigorously interrogate the propositions posed herein and evaluate the utility of the theory. For example, future research can use diverse methodologies, such as survey experiments, in order to isolate the impact of civilians' past lived experiences on the efficacy of symbolic representation.

Notes

¹ Lived experiences should be interpreted both as direct experiences as well as experiences that a person learns about as part of life (what might be called vicarious experiences, whether visual or oral).

² Two individuals might respond to the same experiences in different ways. As an example, a Black officer policing the same city where he or she grew up and lived might think that he or she should be harder on Black residents because he or she expects more of them (e.g., tough love); this view is very different from other Black officers who might be more lenient with those they identify with because they have shared understanding and possibly even more different from other police officers who do not identify with the community at all.

³ How the bureaucrat chooses to identify plays no role in symbolic representation since symbolic representation does not require any bureaucratic action. Bureaucrats' identities become important in cases of active representation and these identities are shaped by myriad factors including social origins, lived experiences, and agency socialization (see Wilkins and Williams

2008 for discussion of the impacts of socialization on Black police officers). While the racial or ethnic identity of the bureaucrat may be more or less salient given other socialization and identity effects, we choose not to model this in the figure due to our explicit focus on the symbolic effect of passive representation on individuals who come into contact with the bureaucracy.

⁴ The theory and the logic here are general about encounters, that is, an encounter should have the same influence on expectations whether the bureaucrat shares an identity with the individual or not. Without a shared identity, however, the process does not apply to symbolic representation.

⁵ Positive results should be considered a relative term, that is, if expectations are generally that treatment is negative or unequal, then neutral or equal treatment would be perceived as a positive result. Recent theoretical work on representative bureaucracy suggests that representation should be conceived as seeking equity in inequitable situations rather than actual advantage (Meier 2019).

⁶ While we think it is important to accurately compare across cities using similar questions, we decided to still present the findings on race from Hartford because they lend key insights. Further, since Washington's police department is overrepresented with officers of color, it may be that when respondents shared their perceptions in response to other questions that race was already salient for them.

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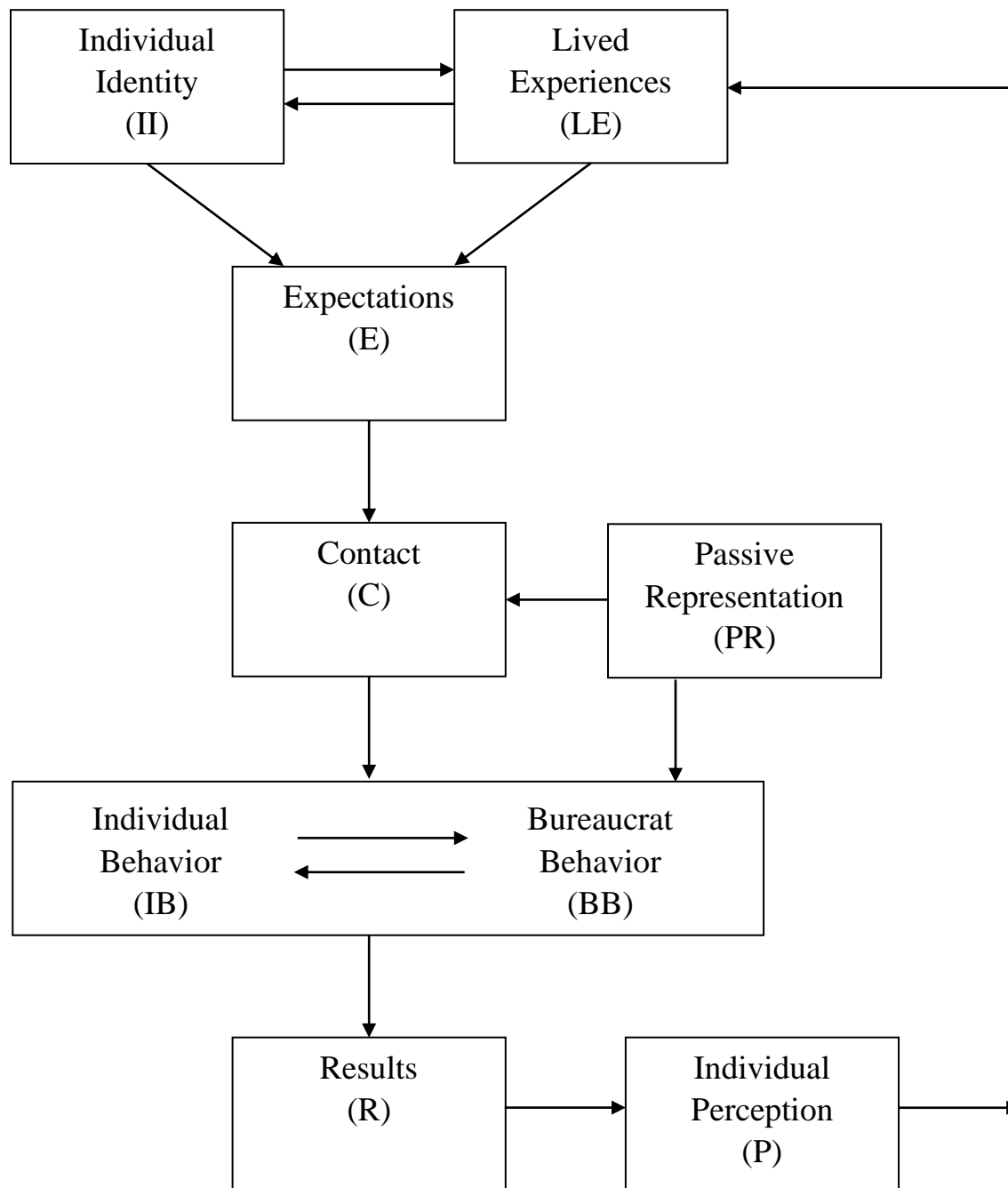


Figure 1. The Micro-theory of Symbolic Representation

Tables

Table 1. City and Police Department Descriptive Statistics

	Washington, DC	Hartford, CT
Population Size	672,391	124,320
Racial and Ethnic Breakdown		
Black	47.7%	35%
White	40.7%	15.5%
Hispanic	10.7%	44%
Median Age	33.9 years	30.6 years
Poverty Rate	17.4%	31.9%
Violent Crime Rate	661.7 per 100,000 pop.	1,093.5 per 100,000 pop
Property Crime Rate	4,275.9 per 100,000 pop	4,200.1 per 100,000 pop
Sworn Police Officers	3,837	412
Racial and Ethnic Breakdown		
Black	52%	12%
White	36%	66%
Hispanic	8%	21%

Note: Statistics were derived from the U.S. Census Bureau and the respective Police Department's as of 2017.

Table 2. Characteristics of Qualitative Sample

	Hartford, CT		Washington, DC	
	(<i>n</i> = 34) ⁱ	Percent	(<i>n</i> = 39)	Percent
Race/Ethnicity				
Black	14	41.2%	22	56.4%
White	11	32.3%	17	43.6%
Latino	9	26.5%	0	0%
Asian	0	0	0	0%
Other	0	0	0	0%
Gender				
Female	13	38.2%	17	43.6%
Male	21	61.8%	22	56.4%
Age				
18-25	0	0	4	10.3%
26-30	1	3.0%	6	15.4%
31-35	5	14.7%	6	15.4%
36-40	3	8.8%	6	15.4%
41-45	3	8.8%	5	12.8%
46-50	5	14.7%	3	7.7%
51-55	3	8.8%	3	7.7%
56-60	5	14.7%	2	5.1%
61-65	4	11.8%	0	0
65+	5	14.7%	4	10.2%
Education				
High school graduate or less	2	5.9%	5	12.8%
Some college credit	5	14.7%	1	2.6%
Associate degree	2	5.9%	6	15.4%
Bachelor's degree	8	23.5%	12	30.7%
Graduate degree	10	29.4%	11	28.2%
Professional degree	7	20.6%	4	10.3%

Note i: There were 31 unique interviews conducted in Hartford, but 3 of the interviews contained multiple interviewees, so in total there were 34 interviewees.